Studies in Patrology I

Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene Fathers

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Introduction:

As we believe that the Coptic Orthodox Church is the Holy and Sacred Body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we also believe that there is a direct and strong connection between our Coptic Church's Fathers, our holy Apostles, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Therefore, the Faith, which was submitted by our Lord Jesus Christ to His holy Apostles, was the same faith submitted to their holy successors who preserved it and submitted it unchanged to their children throughout all the generations of Coptic Christianity. Without the Apostolic Fathers and those holy Fathers who followed in their footsteps we would not have the blessings of "the authentic and unchanged faith" in which we have today.

When our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, glorified Himself with His Holy Resurrection, He appeared to the holy Apostles, *"Then He opened their minds to understand the Holy Scriptures. (Luke 24:45)"* The chosen Apostles after receiving the power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost went out and preached the Kingdom of Heaven in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to as many of those who would hear in other regions. *"They spent their time in learning from the Apostles taking part in the fellowship and sharing in the fellowship, meals and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)" "And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)"* In this way, the preaching of the Holy Gospel of Salvation reached everywhere in the world before the passage of the Era of the Apostles.

The ministry of our holy Apostles was the same as that of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Himself. It defended the preaching of salvation to everyone. The Apostles message was an invitation for repentance of wrong doing and living a holy life through the Lord Jesus Christ. It called for all to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, Savior, and Messiah. *"Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven and you will receive God's Gift, the Holy Spirit. For God's promise was made to you and your children, and to all whom the Lord our God calls to Himself. (Acts 2: 38-39)"*

Further, we saw God's Gift by the power of the Holy Spirit who worked in our Fathers when three thousand people believed the Gospel of Salvation when they heard the message of St Peter, the Apostle, on the Day of Pentecost, *"Many of them believed his message and were baptized and about three thousand people were added to the group that day. (Acts 2:41)"*

Our holy Fathers the Apostles had two characteristic fundamental components of preaching the Word of God. The first entailed the service of the Sacraments, such as Baptism and the Holy Communion. The second was the preaching of the Gospel of Salvation. Prophets, teachers, preachers, and wise men preached that the Church and her ministry were for all people.

In this way, the Holy Spirit worked and still works, in those holy Apostles and their holy successors for the growth and evangelism of the Church. The Apostolic Tradition became an extension of the Holy Bible surrendered to the effect of the Holy Spirit. *"But as for you, continue in the truths that you were taught and firmly believe. You know who your teachers were. (I Timothy 3:14)" So* that the spirit of our

holy Apostles, which is the same as our Lord Jesus Christ, spread to their successors, the Apostolic Fathers, and their beloved children.

Who are the Fathers?

The word "Fathers" was attributed to Patriarchs, Fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the word "Father" referred to preachers and teachers who gave birth spiritually to children in the Church, *"For even if you have ten thousand guardians in your Christian life, you have only one Father in your life in union with Christ Jesus, I have become your Father by bringing the Good News to you. (I Corinthians 4:15)"*

Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (130-200 AD), gave the word "Father" to the teachers in the Church. Saint Irenaeus said, "*Who taught me a letter (of the alphabet), I became his son and he becomes my father."* Also the word "Father" was a term denoting Bishops. This is still common practice in our Coptic Orthodox Church as we refer to our Patriarch and Bishops as "Fathers." Later, the word "Father" was applied to our Orthodox teachers who were considered "Pillars" of our Coptic Church although not with the title of Patriarch or Bishop, such as St Jerome.

Patrology is the science that studies the life and teachings of the Church Father's dating back to the Apostolic Era and continuing unto the sixth century from the Lord Jesus Christ's Holy Birth. The first writer of Patrology was St Jerome. He wrote "The Life of Famous Men" in which he relied heavily upon St Eusebus's "History of the Church."

Patrology includes doctrine, behavior, and spiritual life. Patrology incorporates Church Fathers, Monasticism, and Desert Fathers.

The Church Fathers had certain characteristics in common which included:

1) The Orthodox Doctrine regarding the Holy Trinity, Christology, and the Lord Jesus Christ's penance through the Cross and all Holy Divine Mysteries.
2) A holy and saintly life. "*Whoever obeys the law and teaches others to do the same will be great in the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 5:19)*
3) Their acceptance as "Fathers" by the Church.
4) Antiquity.

The Orthodox Non-Chalcedon Churches (Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian, and Armenian) determine the date of the end of the Fathers Era by the date of the Chalcedon Council of 451 AD. However, according to the Chalcedon Churches in the West, the Fathers Era ends in the 7th Century. St Gregory the Great (604 AD), and Saint Seveille "Theodore" (636 AD) both support this calculation. According to the Chalcedon Churches in the East, the Fathers Era ends by St John of Damascus (749 AD). It is generally agreed that the 4th and 5th centuries are the Golden Eras for Fathers.

Categories of Fathers:

1) Apostolic Fathers: were in direct connection with the chosen Apostles. Included St Clement the Romanian, St Ignatius, St Polycarp, and St Pipirius.
2) Defenders: defended Christianity against idolatry and Jews. Included St Athenodore and St Irenaeus.
3) World's Teachers: St Athanasius the Apostolic, St Basil the Great, St Cyril, St Gregory, St John from Damascus, St Kabryanous, St Ambrose, St Jerome, and St Augustine.
4) Confessors: defended Christianity against heresies. Confessors were St Dioscorus and St Severus of Antioch.

5) Monastic Fathers: St Antony, St Pachoum, St Macarius the Great, and Isidorus, St Shenouda the Archimandrite.

Most of our Church Fathers wrote either by Greek or Latin language, however some wrote Coptic, Syrian, or Armenian.

The Church Fathers who are considered Fathers according to the faith of our Coptic Orthodox Church include:

From the East (writing in the Greek Language) are:

1) St Athanasius, the Apostolic, 20th Pope of Alexandria
2) St Basil the Great
3) St Gregory the Theologian
4) St John Chrysostom
5) St Cyril the Great 24th Pope of Alexandria
6) St Dioscorus 25th Pope of Alexandria
7) St Severus of Antioch

From the West (writing in Latin Language) are:

1) St Cyabrianous
2) St Ambrose
3) St Jerome